

MONTANA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD (MTARNG) WITHDRAWAL AT LIMESTONE HILLS TRAINING AREA

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The MTARNG has received approval from the Department of Defense/Army to file an application (to be submitted by the Corps of Engineers) to withdraw approximately 20,000 acres of BLM-administered land about 3 miles west of the Missouri River near Townsend in Broadwater County, Montana.

ISSUES:

MTARNG has performed training exercises at the Limestone Hills since the 1950s under special land use permits (SLUPs), until 1984 when a 30-year right-of-way was issued to authorize their use. Eighty-eight percent of the range is administered by the BLM, with the remainder under state and private ownership. Live fire training at the range has included helicopter, tank, artillery, mortar and Bradley Infantry vehicle gunnery. The types of weaponry ranged from small arms to 155 mm artillery, all of which have been fired into the impact area. Military training over the years has resulted in unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination, particularly within the interior 5,000-acre impact area, though UXO has also been recovered outside that area. In 1993, COE experts determined that the area south of the 2.75-inch rocket safety fan was "widely contaminated" with UXO. Based on BLM policy, the Butte Field Office implemented an emergency closure on the impact area. The MTARNG was also advised that their R/W for the range would not be renewed upon expiration in 2014, and the only way to assure their continued use of the area was through a withdrawal.

Continental Lime (now Graymont) filed mining claims on lands within the R/W area in the early 1980s when it was authorized by SLUP and the R/W. In 1992 and again in 1995, Graymont filed mining plan amendments resulting in an approved expansion of its operations further into the rocket firing fan area. In an agreement facilitated by the Montana Consensus Council, the MTARNG has agreed to clear UXO from the expansion area so mining can safely continue. BFO recently reviewed a safety plan submitted by MTARNG that would allow Graymont to conduct exploratory drilling south of and into the rocket firing fan. That plan is currently being reviewed by DoD Explosives Safety Bureau (DDESB) for approval. Graymont believes MTARNG must acquire approval by the DDESB before exploration can proceed. Graymont recently informed BFO and MTARNG that the current rate of UXO clearance will likely not meet their exploration needs.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

A site tour was conducted July 2002, with the following entities represented: Butte Field Office (BFO); BLM WO military liaisons; several members of the MTARNG including the Chief of Staff; a Pentagon representative; and the plant manager for Graymont Western U.S Inc. mining company. The BLM will be a cooperating agency for the project legislative environmental impact statement, which has been contracted by MTARNG to Tetra Tech based in Helena, MT. BFO is attempting to finalize an Interagency Agreement with MTARNG which defines roles and responsibilities and provides for cost reimbursement for case processing by MTARNG. The National Guard Bureau (NGB) in Washington, D.C., does not believe they can legally reimburse BFO for its costs associated with processing the withdrawal, and discussion continues. BFO is providing resource information to Tetra Tech. Another unresolved issue with the COE and NGB is the withdrawal application--when it should be filed and what information it should contain. The EIS will result in Finding and Recommendations to the WO and Secretary of Interior. The action will require an amendment of the Headwaters RMP.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is expected to be high. The withdrawal would affect PILT payments, recreationists/hunters, and could impact several grazing allotments depending on how the resource management plan for the firing range is structured after the EIS is completed. There is also potential for the validity of some of the mining claims to be affected by the withdrawal.

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